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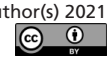
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White tears, white rage: Victimhood and (as) violence in mainstream feminism

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Abstract

Using #MeToo as a starting point, this paper argues that the cultural power of mainstream white feminism partly derives from the cultural power of white tears. This in turn depends on the dehumanisation of people of colour, who were constructed in colonial 'race science' as incapable of complex feeling (Schuller, 2018). Colonialism also created a circuit between bourgeois white women's tears and white men's rage, often activated by allegations of rape, which operated in the service of economic extraction and exploitation. This circuit endures, abetting the criminal punishment system and the weaponisation of 'women's safety' by the various border regimes of the right. It has especially been utilised by reactionary forms of feminism, which set themselves against sex workers and trans people. Such feminisms exemplify what I call 'political whiteness', which centres assertions of victimhood: through these, womanhood (and personhood) is claimed to the exclusion of the enemy. Through legitimating criminal punishment and border policing and dehumanising marginalised Others, claims to victimhood in mainstream feminism often end up strengthening the intersecting violence of racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy.

Keywords

Capitalism, colonialism, feminism, #MeToo, sexual violence, whiteness

> *'You ought to be ashamed of yourself,' said Alice, 'a great girl like you,' (she might well say this), 'to go on crying in this way! Stop this moment, I tell you!' But she went on all the same, shedding gallons of tears, until there was a large pool all round her, about four inches deep and reaching half down the hall.* (Carroll, 1865: 18)

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Introduction: feminism in testimonial culture

> *I've been called one of the first to speak out. No. I was the first.* ***I*** *called the New York Times.* ***I*** *blew it wide open, not them. They won the Pulitzer and I'm the one hard-up for money. It's disgusting. (Rose McGowan in* Gilbey, 2019)

The above quote comes from a 2019 interview in the *Guardian* newspaper, in which actor Rose McGowan disputed how credit for the exposure of Harvey Weinstein had been assigned. As her comments intimate, being the first to speak out is powerful in the testimonial cultures that characterise neoliberalism and its heroic, individuated self (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001: 4). Speaking out can attract political dividends: in earlier work (Phipps, 2016, 2020) I have theorised experience, especially of the traumatic kind, as a form of investment capital in what Ahmed (2012 [2004]: 45) calls the 'affective economies' of testimonial culture. Trauma can be disclosed or ventriloquised to generate further capital in the form of feeling, creating political gain. Being the first to speak out can also have material rewards, particularly in media 'outrage economies' that thrive on controversy and scandal.

#MeToo could perhaps be seen as the paradigm feminist movement of the testimonial age. However, it did not start out that way: it began in 2006 as a programme of work created by Black feminist and civil rights activist Tarana Burke, to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of colour, find pathways to healing.[1] The phrase 'me too' denoted Burke's central principle of 'empowerment through empathy' which focused on marginalised survivors connecting and supporting each other (Murray, 2017). Eleven years later, this phrase went viral as a hashtag, following a tweet by actor Alyssa Milano and the input of other white celebrities and politicians (Tambe, 2018). Analysis of over 600,000 #MeToo posts showed they varied between personal stories and support, posting articles, discussing alleged perpetrators, and general commentary (Manikonda et al., 2018). However, perhaps supported by the declarative nature of the hashtag and the testimonial media cultures it was shared in, #MeToo was generally viewed as a movement of mass disclosure.

Testimony has been fundamental to public feminisms around sexual violence (Serisier, 2018). Putting our trauma 'out there' is a means to escape being consumed by it 'in here' (Lorde in Desmoines and Nicholson, 1978: 13), a way of reclaiming subjectivity and control after it has been stolen through sexual violation (Serisier, 2018: 11). However, the mass public testimony of #MeToo both echoed and departed from feminist consciousness-raising principles. As Tarana Burke herself argued, social media movements do not automatically provide aftercare; in an interview with *Elle*, she said, 'I [worried] people would say 'me too' and then not go to a rape crisis centre' (Murray, 2017). The demographics of the movement also diverged from Burke's focus on more marginalised survivors supporting one another.

Most of the key figures in the viral iteration of #MeToo were Western, white and middle or upper-class (Tambe, 2018), reflecting the makeup of mainstream feminism and especially its media iterations.[2] As Black actor and sexual violence activist Gabrielle Union said on *Good Morning America*, 'I think the floodgates have opened for white women'. Union's use of floodgates as a metaphor is significant. #MeToo was described as a 'flood' of stories of sexual assault by CNN, CBS and CBC, and a 'tsunami' on

CNBC, in the *Times of India*, the *New York Times*, and the US *National Post* (see Phipps, 2020: 37, 71). These characterisations evoked trauma on a massive scale, representing the movement as a collective weeping, a release of (white) tears.

The 'wounded attachments' of political whiteness

In her 1995 book *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown argued that progressive movements tended to coalesce around 'wounded identities' that demanded recognition and protection, whether from hate speech, harassment or violence. For Brown (1995: 55), such politics not only reified said identities but ontologised trauma, producing a 'politics of recrimination and rancor' with deep investments in victimisation and suffering. Second-wave feminism in particular, Brown argued, had instantiated 'woman' as an identity based on injury. She interpreted feminist consciousness-raising and the 'speak out' as akin to Foucault's (1978) 'modern confessional' in their production of accounts that could be appropriated by punitive (and therapeutic) state governmentalities. Solidifying the 'truth' of women's experience through 'speaking out', she contended, was not necessarily liberation (Brown 1995: 42).

As I have argued elsewhere (Phipps, 2019), the 'wounded attachments' Brown attributed to feminism are likely to be those of middle-class whiteness, given the domination of both first and second waves of mainstream feminism by bourgeois white women (such as myself) (Ware, 1992: 18). By 'mainstream feminism', I largely mean Anglo-American public feminism. This includes media feminism (and some forms of social media feminism), institutional feminism, corporate feminism and policy feminism. This is not a cohesive and unified movement, but it has clear directions and effects. Building on HoSang (2010), I call the *modus operandi* of this feminism 'political whiteness'. This goes beyond the implicitly or explicitly 'whites first' orientation of most politics dominated by white people: it has a complex affective landscape involving attachments to the self (often the wounded self) and to power (often in the form of the state). These attachments produce a number of dynamics: narcissism, alertness to threat (which in white women's case is often sexualised), and an accompanying need for control. Political whiteness characterises both mainstream feminism and the backlash against it, as they 'battle it out' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 1) on the contemporary cultural stage.

Victimhood is central to these battles (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 4). Women's sexual victimisation has been at the forefront of recent mainstream feminist campaigns, exemplified by actions such as the Women's March as well as the viral iteration of #MeToo. Responding to this, the backlash has been preoccupied with who the *real* victims are. One of its central claims is that 'feminism has gone too far' (Nicholas and Aguis, 2017: 31), and that men are now fearful because harmless touching has been defined as abuse. These narratives are bolstered by broader stories of white victimhood which have underpinned Brexit, the election of Trump, and the elevation of other far-right figures and parties worldwide (Corredor, 2019).

Crying 'white-lady tears'

On International Men's Day 2019, *Good Morning Britain* host Piers Morgan broadcast a monologue comparing middle-class white men to endangered rhinos. 'Yes, we do need a

day', he said. 'We are now the most downtrodden group of men in the world'. Assertions such as this, from the heart of the backlash, have been given short shrift by white feminists who often use the idiom of 'male tears'. In 2014, writer Jessica Valenti tweeted a picture of herself wearing a T-shirt with the slogan: I BATHE IN MALE TEARS (Phipps, 2020: 69). However, white feminists have been slower to acknowledge our own tendency to be lachrymose, which is often an attempt to avoid accountability in response to criticism by women of colour. Historically, bourgeois white women's power has been based on ideas of virtue and goodness (Ware, 1992: 37–38): as Hamad (2019: 105) argues, this makes being criticised for bad behaviour deeply threatening. White women can also be so invested in our oppression as women that we resist addressing our privilege as white (Accapadi, 2007: 208).

Robin di Angelo (2011: 57) argues that white people in general exist in a state of fragility 'in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering defensive moves'. di Angelo has been critiqued for her individualised focus on self-improvement rather than structural change (Jackson, 2019). However, an understanding of whiteness as the performance of structural supremacy still involves fragility, whether this is the angry brittleness of hegemonic white masculinity or the 'delicacy' of white bourgeois femininity (the source of its power). If anger is the main expression of white power in a masculine register, tears are its feminine equivalent. 'Tear', as a both a noun and a verb, has multiple meanings: bourgeois white womanhood both tears (in the sense of becoming torn or damaged), and consequently tears (in the sense of tearing up), easily. This 'damsel in distress' evokes a protective response: and simultaneously, colonial archetypes of people of colour as aggressive and frightening come into play. This is the pretext on which white men, enraged, *tear the place apart*.

Hamad (2019: 105) terms this Strategic White Womanhood, a historical dynamic which endures in the contemporary, in various forms. She recounts a relevant incident in 2018 involving Cambridge professors Mary Beard and Priyamvada Gopal. Beard was challenged by Gopal and others over a tweet she had posted on allegations of sexual abuse by Oxfam staff in Haiti and elsewhere. 'I do wonder how hard it must be to sustain civilised values in a war zone', it said. In response to criticism, Beard tweeted a picture of herself crying; afterwards, Gopal in particular was the target of racist attacks (Hamad 2019: 102–105). For Hamad (2019: 25, 229), this exemplifies the abusive relationship women of colour have with white womanhood. When the going gets tough, she argues, white women 'turn their sanctioned victim status' on women of colour. While privileged white women bathe in male tears, women of colour can drown in ours.

Our sanctioned victim status shields privileged white women from accountability in interpersonal interactions and in the political sphere. In her discussion of the 2017 Women's March, Brittney Cooper (2018: 182) highlighted exit polls that found 53 percent of white women voted for Trump, compared to 94 percent of Black women who voted for Clinton (despite their reservations). Watching white women protest Trump's election, she wrote, when we were partly responsible for it, felt like 'an exercise in white-lady tears if I ever saw one'. Read in a structural way, the Women's March could be seen as an action that hid white women's complicity in Trump's success (Phipps, 2020: 120) – in Hamad's terms, Strategic White Womanhood writ large.

In May 2019, Theresa May wept outside 10 Downing Street as she resigned the UK premiership. These tears did political work, creating amnesia in some quarters over May's record as Prime Minister, and previously as Home Secretary. Perhaps most strikingly, domestic abuse charity Women's Aid posted a (subsequently deleted) tweet thanking May for her service to women and survivors. This prompted a critical response: prior to her resignation, May had failed to guarantee that women's refuges would not close as part of an overhaul of supported housing. In 2015, she had been accused of allowing 'state-sanctioned' rape and abuse of vulnerable migrant women at the Yarl's Wood detention centre. Her government presided over the rollout of Universal Credit, the punitive benefits system that has made it more difficult for women to leave abusive relationships. It appeared that, for some, May's tears washed these acts out of the picture (Phipps, 2020: 70).

In response to a picture of May crying, news anchor Eylon Levy tweeted: 'this is such a haunting photo. Whatever you think about Theresa May's record as prime minister, it's impossible not to feel sorry for her as a person'.[3] This attempt to separate the personal and political is central to white women's tears as a strategic device. We demand to be treated as 'just a person' who should be granted the benefit of the doubt, who exists outside racialised structures and power relations even as our actions perpetuate them. However, while privileged white feminists deny the relationship between the personal and the political in response to critique, in our own theory and politics this relationship (and in particular, *our own* personal experience or that of women like us) takes centre stage. This is more than just hypocrisy; it is white supremacy. Whether we deny or emphasise the relationship between the personal and political, white women's tears enable us to centre ourselves and marginalise women of colour.

In an article on #MeToo, Jamilah Lemieux (2017) commented, 'white women know how to be victims. They know just how to bleed and weep in the public square, they fundamentally understand that they are entitled to sympathy'. Lemieux was not claiming the disclosures of #MeToo were not genuine; she was highlighting the power brought to mainstream feminism by the power of white women's tears. White-*lady* tears, to use Cooper's phrase: *bourgeois* white women's tears are the ultimate symbol of femininity, evoking the damsel in distress and the mourning, lamenting women of myth (Phipps, 2020: 71). It is likely that this power is not fully accessible to working-class white women, who are often figures of classed disgust (Tyler, 2008). While it might date back to the ancients, the power of bourgeois white women's tears was solidified in the modern colonial period, as 'women's protection' became key to the deadly disciplinary power that maintained racialised and classed regimes of extraction and exploitation.

White tears, white rage, white personhood

White supremacy produces both white tears and white rage, and colonialism relied on a circuit between bourgeois white women's tears and white men's punitive power. This was often activated by the vocabulary of rape: Indigenous, colonised and enslaved men were maimed and killed after allegations made by bourgeois white women (Ware, 1992: 11, 37). As Angela Davis (1981: 106–111) argues, both mass rape of Black women and allegations of rape against Black men have been instruments of white supremacy (Davis,

1981: 106–111). In earlier phases of capitalism, rape laws functioned to protect upper-class men, whose wives or daughters (their property) might be violated (Davis, 1981: 101). In the genocidally violent relations of theft, capture and chattel that characterised colonial capitalism, rape prohibitions took on similar meanings at the levels of community, nation and race.

In colonial Australia, rape was a 'violation of female purity' punishable by death: politicians insisted this was necessary to keep Aboriginal and 'disreputable' (poor) white men under control (Kaladelfos, 2012: 159). The vulnerable bourgeois white woman was central to accounts of insurrections such as the Indian Mutiny and the Morant Bay uprising in Jamaica (Ware, 1992: 39–42): fear of rape was fear of revolution. In the United States, following the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, white Americans used lynching to terrorise and control Black people. Rape of a white woman was one of the most common pretexts for attacks on growing Black social and economic power (Ware, 1992: 179–182). In 1921, white mobs (many of them deputised and/or given weapons by city officials) killed between 100 and 300 Black people and destroyed 1000 houses in Greenwood, Tulsa, after a Black man was falsely accused of assaulting a white female elevator operator. Greenwood Avenue had been known as 'Black Wall Street' because it was one of the most affluent African-American communities of the early 20th century (Madigan, 2001).

The story of Emmett Till is perhaps the best-known of this history of what Sharpe (2016: 15) calls the 'ongoingness of the conditions of capture'. A 14-year-old Till was brutalised and killed by two white men in Mississippi in 1955, after Carolyn Bryant falsely accused him of 'uttering obscenities' and grabbing her by the waist. Jessie Daniels (2018) has called Bryant 'the foremother of contemporary white women who call the police on Black people sitting in a Starbucks, barbecuing in a park or napping in a dorm', acts that have also led to fatal violence (Sharpe, 2016: 52). The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests following the police murder of George Floyd reiterated that Black lives are still the price of white affective security (see Schuller, 2018: 2), and Black death is still crucial to the operation of the white supremacist state (see Sharpe, 2016: 9). White women's 'safety' is also central to contemporary border regimes, which purport to protect us from immigrants and traffickers but actually *create* the conditions for mass exploitation and abuse (Mac and Smith, 2018: 59–60, 75–76).

Political whiteness involves a will to power: in the case of bourgeois white women, this was and is often achieved through performances of powerlessness. We exist at the intersections of capitalism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, with little control over the means of production (Lugones, 2008: 15) but with raced and classed dominance that requires feminine submission. Like Penelope in Homer's Odyssey, we fling ourselves on the floor and cry. This activates the settler's and master's revenge, now embodied in the necropolitical (Mbembe, 2003) criminal punishment and border control that captures Black and brown people and/or leaves them to perish: what Sharpe (2016: 16) terms the 'reappearance of the slave ship in everyday life'. This circuit between white tears and white rage means that the relationship between the personal and political in white feminism has always been corruptible or perhaps even inherently corrupt.

In contrast to the damsel in distress, the woman of colour has had her innocence stripped by colonialism, often through rape (Hamad, 2019: 18–19). As Angela Davis

(1981) argues, colonial ideas about Black sexual 'savagery' created both the notions of the Black man as rapist and the Black woman as un-rapeable, encased in the notion of Black people's bodies as objects to which anything could be done (Sharpe, 2016: 13). During #MeToo, the only allegations Harvey Weinstein publicly refuted were from actors Salma Hayek and Lupita Nyong'o: Hamad (2018: 55) argues that this was because brown and Black women are easier to discredit. Women of colour, and particularly Black women, are not able to politicise their pain in the way white women do: this both reflects and perpetuates their *thingification* (Césaire, 1950: 42) and 'abjection from the realm of the human' (Sharpe, 2016: 12).[4]

It is not just that the tears of white women are valued while those of Black women are dismissed. It is that *race itself* (and perhaps class, at least to a certain extent) is defined by the perceived capacity to cry, that the performance of bourgeois white emotion accomplishes the dehumanisation of people of colour. As Kyla Schuller (2018) has shown, in 19th-century sex and race 'science', ideas about sex difference (seen as a property of bourgeois whiteness) intermingled with ideas about feeling. This divided the 'civilised' body into two halves: 'the sentimental woman . . . and the less susceptible and more rational man' (Schuller 2018: 16). The bourgeois white woman's capacity to cry was fundamental to her dominant status, as was the capacity of her male counterpart to respond to her tears with action. Humanness came to refer to both an assumed capacity for feeling *and* the capacity to control it.

In contrast, Schuller argues, Black people were seen as driven by impulses and sensations. Other people of colour were defined differently, yet similarly stripped of their sensibilities: Asian people became 'enervated' and 'stagnant' remnants of the past, while Native people were 'animated fossils destined to go the way of the dinosaurs' (Schuller, 2018: 11). These racialised symbolics fitted material bodies to labour differently for capital accumulation. Communities of racialised people were drafted, appropriated or kidnapped from across continents for both free and enslaved labour, forced reproduction and coerced experimentation, 'on the grounds that they lacked the nervous capacity to feel any harm' (Schuller, 2018: 14). The racialised construction of feeling also created the need to protect the refined, sensitive and civilised bourgeois white subject from the 'coarse, rigid and savage elements of the population suspended in the eternal state of flesh' (Schuller, 2018: 8).

In the afterlives of colonialism and slavery (Hartman, 2007: 6), these dynamics persist. Middle-class white women are allowed emotions and inner worlds, while women of colour are not (Hamad: 18-19). (White) 'women's protection' upholds the edifice of criminal punishment and the violence of the national border (Phipps, 2020: 11, 79), while people of colour become an undifferentiated mass whose tragedies, like the 'migrant crisis', are often consumed and forgotten (Sharpe, 2016: 33, 74–75, see also Chouliaraki, 2006). The resistance of Black people and other people of colour is often ignored even by those who are in solidarity, or dismissed as 'senseless rage' by those who are not (Bailey, 2016: 1–23). White feminism, with tears as its centrepiece, is a factor in this racial calculus (Hartman, 2007: 6). Furthermore, some reactionary strands of white feminism have capitalised upon narratives around victimhood and 'women's protection' and in doing so, have become entangled with the contemporary far right.

Feminists and the far right

Reactionary feminisms, which coalesce around debates about sex workers' rights and transgender equality, magnify the political whiteness of the mainstream and deliberately withhold womanhood and personhood from marginalised Others. Trans women are defined as 'biological men' while trans-exclusionary feminists are 'adult human females'. Sex workers' rights are juxtaposed with 'women's safety', a manoeuvre in which the womanhood of sex workers is implicitly denied. This reasserts the normative economically productive body and reproductive sex. It conjures up colonial sex difference and bourgeois white womanhood as a symbol of moral order, set against the racialised and enslaved inhabitants of colonised and settled territories and the multi-racial, 'dangerous, immoral, and libidinal lower classes' of the metropolis (Tyler, 2008: 22). In this mentality, neither the 'unnatural' or the 'unrespectable' woman can ever be a real woman (Phipps, 2020: 151).

Victimhood, disclosed or ventriloquised, is central to these dynamics. In sex industry debates, harrowing narratives of suffering in pornography, prostitution and trafficking are used to implore people to 'listen to survivors' (Phipps, 2016: 309–310). These traumatic experiences are deployed within a colonial feminist framework (Ahmed, 1992: 151) that demands border regimes and regulation policies which sex workers oppose. The latter includes the Nordic Model of client criminalisation, and the prohibition of online advertising of sexual services: both have been shown to drive sex work underground, creating additional risk (Mac and Smith, 2018). Projects to 'get' the pimps and traffickers do not target the conditions – austerity, Fortress Europe, criminalisation itself – that create these figures in the first place. Nevertheless, when sex workers highlight this they are often defined as 'happy hookers' who do not care about 'women's safety' (Mac and Smith, 2018: 14).

Trans-exclusionary (or 'gender-critical') feminism similarly relies on accounts of sexual victimisation, set alongside a construction of trans women as predatory and essentially male. This pertains to discussions about trans women's inclusion in women's services and other spaces such as prisons, toilets and changing rooms (Serano, 2013: 31). Trans women are made responsible for acts of violence committed by cis men, through narratives that naturalise the penis as violence and stick this organ to the trans woman via an intrusive and violent obsession with her surgical status (Phipps, 2016: 311). Simultaneously (like other reactionary politics), trans-exclusionary feminism monsters trans women in general through publicising isolated incidents of violence committed by members of this group. The effect of both tactics is to repackage trans equality as predation: trans women's demands to be recognised as women are reinterpreted as invasion and sexual threat.

This reactionary feminist politics exemplifies the threatened bourgeois femininity of political whiteness. This is magnified in claims to be silenced and oppressed, which have been made by reactionary feminists (or men speaking on their behalf) in high-profile media outlets (Phipps, 2020: 150). The narrative – that reactionary feminists are the real victims but their voices are not being heard – achieves several aims. It disseminates reactionary feminist ideas; it deploys Strategic White Womanhood to avoid accountability; it uses the device of white women's tears to deny humanity to the Other. Reactionary feminists seize womanhood – and personhood – while sex workers become uncaring

'happy hookers' and trans women become shadowy threats. We see the weeping Madonna versus the unfeeling whore. We see the weeping survivor versus the menacing predator. Neither sex workers or trans women are entitled to complex feelings or to claim victimisation on their own behalf.

Many of the most marginalised sex workers and trans women are women of colour, and Black feminists have also suggested that symbolically, these categories are associated with Blackness. As Sharpe (2016: 21–22, 31) writes, Blackness is already transgendered and queered, because binary gender is a construction of bourgeois and colonial whiteness. Bourgeois whiteness appears in sharp relief against the Black people 'ungendered' in the hold of the ship (Spillers, 2003: 206), and the 'future criminals', 'prostitutes', 'thugs' and 'birthers of terror' that supplant girls and boys, men and women, in the *anagrammatics* of Blackness (Sharpe 2016: 47, 55).[5] Hartman (2019) highlights the persistent association of Blackness with prostitution, grounded in notions of commodification that link enslaved people and sex workers, and colonial constructions of Black sexual 'excess' (see also Davis, 1981: 106).

Flavia Dzodan views trans-exclusionary feminism as a settler-colonial mentality in its attempt to solidify the sex/gender/sexuality system (Rubin, 1975) which intertwines with race and class in the division of labour through difference (Skeggs, 2019: 32). Its essentialist mind-set reflects how 'the coloniser could name us, assign us a place and a role in the hierarchies'[6] – a mind-set exemplified in the ledger that rendered Black people illegible as humans, which reappears in contemporary border regimes (Sharpe, 2016: 30). The reactionary feminist emphasis on social purity (a campaign against the managed prostitution zone in Leeds was openly named 'save our eyes') also summons colonial ghosts: the bourgeois white women missionaries, social reformers and philanthropists sent forth to 'civilise' people of colour and working-class white people both overseas and in the metropolis (Hartman, 2019: 24; Ware, 1992: 149–150).

Anti-trans and anti-sex worker feminisms continue the legacy of 'respectable' femininity as a tool of capitalist and colonial domination (see McClintock, 1995: 47). They are complicit with the contemporary far right, which argues that countries should be invaded, borders closed, walls built and marginalised people incarcerated, to 'keep (white) women safe'. There are significant, and growing, financial and other material associations between reactionary feminists and far right groups, which exploit the circuit between white tears and white rage. For instance, *Hands Across the Aisle*'s mission statement reads:

> *We are radical feminists, lesbians, Christians and conservatives that are tabling our ideological differences to stand in solidarity against gender identity legislation, which we have come to recognize as the erasure of our own hard-won civil rights.*[7]

Through this initiative, trans-exclusionary feminists associate with the US National Catholic Bioethics Centre, the American College of Paediatricians (an anti-LGBT group not to be confused with the American Academy of Paediatrics) and Tucker Carlson's website the Daily Caller.

For me, these alliances bring to mind Patricia Hill Collins' article 'Learning from the Outsider Within', in which she reproduces a quote from an interview conducted by John Gwaltney with 73-year-old Nancy White:

> *My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog. Now, she said that to say this: we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do it well or not. But the white woman is closer to the master and he pats them on the head and lets them sleep in the house, but he ain't gon' treat neither one like he was dealing with a person. (Hill Collins, 1986: S17)*

As Hill Collins (1986: S19) explains, the white woman may feel that she is 'part of the family', when in fact she is a 'well-cared-for pet'. Bourgeois white women achieve personhood in relative terms, largely through the dehumanisation of people of colour. We may experience the necropolitical rage of white men as vicarious power in the form of protection, when ultimately we too are property, to be abused at will (so perhaps not always *that* well-cared-for) but defended violently from the Others. Our tears do not often hold powerful white men accountable (such as Brett Kavanaugh, for example, or Donald Trump), but are *used by them* in the service of domination and control. Reactionary feminism appears content for women to be championed by men who reserve their own right to perpetrate abuse. In this way, it bolsters its proponents' race and class supremacy, and *all women's* gendered subordination.

Conclusion

> *'I wish I hadn't cried so much!' said Alice, as she swam about, trying to find her way out. 'I shall be punished for it now, I suppose, by being drowned in my own tears! That* ***will*** *be a queer thing, to be sure! However, everything is queer to-day'. Just then she heard something splashing about in the pool a little way off . . . it was only a mouse that had slipped in like herself. (Carroll, 1865: 23)*

The cultural power of white tears, which underpins movements such as the viral iteration of #MeToo, is a racialised and classed power which relies on the illegibility of women of colour, and Black women especially, as victims. To paraphrase Christina Sharpe (2016: 20), it is not just that Black woman are excluded from mainstream feminism. The constitution of emotionality in opposition to Blackness means they may be 'the ejection, the abjection, by, on, through, which' the testimonial politics of the movement constitutes itself (see also Hartman, 2019: 90). Victimhood is dressed in white. The 'sanctioned victim status' (Hamad, 2019: 25) of bourgeois white women especially can be turned on women of colour in interpersonal interactions: this evokes less Alice's pool (which in the end, turned out quite benign) and more a salty grave.

Structurally, bourgeois white women's tears support what Sharpe (2016: 16) calls 'reappearances of the slave ship': 'protecting (white) women' fuels the necropolitics of criminal punishment and the border regimes of Fortress Europe, North America and other parts of the world. These tears enter a world in which marginalised people are disposable, whether they are Black people killed by police, migrants left to starve or drown (Sharpe 2016: 43–44, 54), or trans people and sex workers (many of them people of colour) disproportionately left to survive outside bourgeois families, communities and the law. The circuit between white women's tears and white men's rage means that because we cry, marginalised people can die. As some forms of reactionary feminism exploit this circuit in their engagements with the far right, their narratives of victimhood

can themselves be understood as violence. The ship, then, stays afloat: captained by white men, but suspended in a pool of white women's tears.

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Notes

1. Sometimes I refer to women of colour as a group (for instance, when racism treats them as such), and sometimes I describe specific experiences and archetypes, for instance related to Black people. There is, of course, great diversity within racialised communities: however, my arguments often pertain to their symbolic construction (see also Ware, 1992: xii).
2. There were many interventions into #MeToo which had an intersectional and decolonial focus: for instance, by the Alianza Nacional de Campesinas and similar groups of domestic and other service workers. The hashtag trended worldwide and was associated with a number of movements including the 65 day Garima Yatra (dignity march) of around 5000 Dalit and Adivasi survivors in India.
3. Tweet posted by @EylonALevy at 10:44 am, 24 May 2019.
4. The Muslim woman, who is always-already victimised (Ahmed, 1992; Ware, 1992), is an exception: however, she is not allowed to speak. Her feelings are ventriloquised by white women who act as saviours, to gain platforms and power for ourselves (Phipps, 2020: 74–75).
5. Anagrammatical blackness, for Sharpe (2016: 45–48), is the process by which 'grammatical gender' falls away: '*girl* doesn't mean 'girl' but, for example, 'prostitute' or 'felon', *boy* doesn't mean 'boy' but 'Hulk Hogan' or 'gunman''. This degendering also, paradoxically, supported the violent exploitation of enslaved women's reproductive labour, which 'turn[ed] the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection much like the slave ship's hold'.
6. Tweet posted by @redlightvoices at 9:49 am, 4 February 2019.
7. I have written extensively about these alliances in my (2020) book *Me, Not You* – see especially chapter 6.

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